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AVERAGING **INSIGHT**

WHAT IS IT with grant juries in this country? Seems they're always overloaded with writers whose signal fluency is naturalistic narrative, and hardly ever represented with writers embodying experimental, esoteric, progressive, or even poetic sensibilities! Most of the writers invited to sit on grant juries, have achieved a measure of success in the extra-literary ethos of commercial publishing, often bringing with them little more than insight into the criteria of their editors and publishers, a disturbing standard of industrial reductivism against which submissions are too often obscenely measured. This can be particularly unaccommodating for esoteric writers whose work not only has little to do with these criteria of marketable journalism, but to a great degree, actually opposes the reduction of cultural insights to capital concerns.

Many of the jurors write reports both for the literary journals and the newspapers, the 'art' of becoming a successful reviewer, heavily dependent on the ability to reduce complex structures and insights to a language the common joe can comprehend. The more successful the reviewer, the more credible these reductions, or so the grant bodies – and to a sad degree, the literary community – seem eager to conclude when seeking out potential jurors – or critics.

Yet a moment's reflection might insinuate a mote of doubt about the capabilities of those who speak loudest to the broadest mass, at least where the apprehension of insistently experimental imperatives is concerned. Can you in fact, expect reporters to keep up with, or even care about the more esoteric incursions of the craft, captivated as they are, by the lemming denominators of deadline, current events, and selling you on their utter detachment!

I am reminded of Christie Blatchford's expedient 'review' of the grant-lottery in Ontario, 'There's Real Art to this Slashing' (Toronto Sun, 1 December 1995), in which she – a writer – defends cuts to the OAC budget with the pathetically familiar ultimatum, "if the taxpayers want to support a theatre or an artist, they can do it directly by buying a ticket or a painting", entirely ignoring the many-thousand-year-old commonplace that art has *never* been sustained or advanced primarily by those fortunate enough to sell what they produce.

Art has more to do with conductivity than productivity, a somewhat alarming display of the partial scope of journalistic consideration, especially concerning a discipline – and thereby a tradition – she claims to know! Yet advanced with the effrontery and authority of one experienced at her post sufficiently to qualify her comments ostensibly, as insightful across the broadest spectrum of literary culture...

Hard to imagine anyone buying myopic assertions like this, but writers incapable of recognizing even the more publicized refinements of experimental literature, are regularly enlisted by grant

bodies to pass presumptuous judgement on work they haven't the slightest insight into. Why? Because they've made a mark at the visible end of the spectrum, which qualifies them at large apparently as experienced arbiters of the entire art (credibility by default) – at least in the expedient view of their employers.

Yet I contend that the majority of those who've made a name for themselves in Canadian literature, are no more qualified to evaluate fairly – that is, on art's terms, *not theirs* – the broad restivity of literary forms and fashions that have arisen since they settled into their favoured modes and profitable genres (or indeed, of those revolutionary antecedents which exceeded their formative emulations), than a quick-draw journalist imperiously advocating the withdrawal of support for the likes of Vincent Van Gogh, every advocacy closing one off at least partially, from the essential wonder in which all art is nurtured without prejudice, to appreciation.

What we need are impartial jurors – and scribblers – emphasizing greater fluency in art, open to every figure of expression and insight, determined to learn the terms on which the most apparently wayward emission is conducted, in their effort to 'read' submissions – and literary culture – fairly.

A Humanist, say, steeped in the conviction of a causal cosmology, impassioned with certitude and rectitude, unregenerate in his affinity for anecdote and syllogism, preaching expression, respecting consensus, and eager to preserve the lyrical hegemony of Social Realism, might not

reflexively appreciate the more strenuous precepts of modern relativism beyond, for instance, the tepid distillations of Imagism, or the iconoclasm of Anti-art utopians who practiced destruction and disruption as a preamble to the regeneration of some unexampled ideal (largely social, yet advanced persistently in cultural terms).

But grant bodies, neurotically sensitive to charges of gender, race, or regional discrimination, seem determined to convene juries that meet social, before cultural standards, the shortcomings in a juror's literary discriminations, apparently, negligible by comparison. If the writers they invite to form their juries can't be relied on to recognize art resounding the obliquities of a most strenuously experimental modernism, how can you expect the grant bodies to even be aware of the lacuna?

Perhaps a preliminary tabulation of some of the modern efforts to effect a more relative – and thereby more responsible – form of expression, might help to alert them to the extent of the handicap imposed on our more progressive writers, by this reliance on the discretion of jurors intent on measuring art to their own standards.

What quotient of responsibility is afforded by the average grant juror, for instance, regarding Mallarmé's dissociative authority of autonomous language? Or Jarry's synchronic subversion of category? Of Marinetti's kinetic vision of a mantic poetry of intuition predicated on the physiologics of matter (nouns) and on language-liberated-from-tradition (bruitism)? Or Cravan's ventriloquial imposture, and spontaneous authority?

Of Jacques Vaché's solipsistic *umour* or, joyless futility of revelation, the decadent extract of Jarry's gratuitous absurdity? Of Tzara's savage irrationalism of verbal delirium, a language devoid of logic and syntax? Of Hugo Ball's correlative spontaneous eruptions of phonetic expression, a poetry free from the contamination of meaning (and incidentally, advanced *to renounce journaleze..?*)? Of Apollinaire's liberated language cascaded against hierarchy, convention, conviction, and tradition, which broke the page wide open? Or the constructive anarchy of collage in cubism? Of Breton's sanitation of decomposition, and the abolition of memory as well as authority, in his systematic associative transcendence of the world in the word afforded by Futurist and Dadaist examples of Automatism? Of, in short, the rabid estrangement of Anti-art from the robotic contemplations of a mediated relation to macrocosm, which enshrined contradiction, paradox, enigma, uncertainty, and the indefinite, before Heisenberg would demonstrate his scientific 'proof' of indeterminacy, and the relief that perception is merely intentional, to the radio-age sceptic!

At best, most reportorial scribblers are arguably aware of the 'tenor' of Anti-art, without ever really having examined its iconoclasm at length, or from within. Yet when we turn to the theories and influences underlying the more progressive departures of *constructive* renovation in modernist literature, it appears they have even less familiarity than with the actual precepts of the *destructive* revision préciséd above.

So where would that leave the writer who submits experiments in classic modernist – let alone post-modernist – construction, when the judges have little working sense of the figures invoked, on which to even identify much less evaluate the submissions?!

How many jurors, for instance, might recognize employment of Pound's innovations of homeomorphism (the identifiable virtu of persona)? Or the luminous detail as transformer of insight, constellated as patterned integrities in the new paideuma of the vortex (which structurally shifted the cartesian emphasis to the bias of obliquity – *ie*, the oblique line replacing a straight plotting of insights on the sanitized cross of upstanding and level-headed inclinations – a vorticism tailor-made to parallel his parodic displacement of strict didacticism with the obliquity of the so-called exemplary tradition which advances the artist, however facetiously, as the work of art)? Or the recipe for the poem put forward in place of the poem itself, to illustrate discrimination above elaboration, and dramatize economy and concision? Or the shift from metre to syllable (*motz el son*)? Or the subject rhyme? Or the sincerity of dissociation (*ie*, the unwobbling pivot of discrimination, of thing from thing, category from category, impulse from impulse, *etc*), poem as interminable distinction? Or, the poem including, not merely embracing, history?

Funny, the writer invoking innovations like these in a context like Canadian literature where hardly anyone it seems, reflexively recognizes them, incites a demonstration of another of

Pound's precepts, a kind of usura ensued in interest paid by composition for which there turns out to be virtually no return! Yet these are some of the more notorious swatches in the modernist makeover of language and insight; where does that leave the scribbler who invokes even more obscure modern models with which to examine the limits of expression?

Would the average juror be able to recognize an investigation into Stein's speech reduced to the physicalities (word exceeding referent), or an application of Eliot's anonymism? Or would they be prepared to appreciate the employment of Williams's premises of syntactic leverage, and language indifferent to audition (*ie*, denotation precluding etymology), which gave rise to his famous dictum, 'no ideas but in things'?

These are yet conspicuous precepts compared say, with those of Stevens (pure coruscations that lie beyond imagination), of Bunting (*dichtung = condensare*), of Olson (proprioception; and composition-by-field – the gravid breathline), and of Spicer (theory of outside; ghost of language; the deliberate solecism of language-turned-image and image-turned-language, distilled from his refinement of Rimbaud's orderly derangement of the senses, on which he tanked his dipsomanic automatist rerun).

Nor have we considered Burroughs's language-as-virus and the remonstrances of the post-positioned thoroughbreds against authority, intentionality, and ontology (*ie*, defying privilege of perception over language). And where is the allowance for velocity of insight and association,

that extemporaneous affinity for spontaneous improvisation which every counter-culture has emphasized to some degree, in contempt of rehearsed expression, or rote concurrence? Where, the accommodation of cultural reflex (*ie*, the kinæsthetic degree to which meat may be roused by reflection)?

Not enough to have heard of such things – homolinguistics, for instance, particularly in passing – responsible writers ultimately needing to confront the precepts of the art they presume to adopt, and hear them in their own voice. Only then are they qualified to adjudicate submissions invoking those ideals.

Seems straightforward enough, requiring a knowledge of Spanish in a juror evaluating Cuban poetry (though a knowledge of Cuban idioms might be preferred..). Without a working knowledge of the precepts and insights touched on ever so obliquely by experimental writers, one can only wonder what the average juror makes of such use of literature!

“The criterion by which most critics condemn such devices seems to me to be that of pure reporting, and against the kind of novel they admire I am in rebellion.”

MALCOLM LOWRY TO JONATHAN CAPE
2 January 1946